

Derech Ha-Rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

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First Shabbat Meal

Shabbat has a powerful strength in relation to everything associated with Teshuva (repentance). Shabbat is a portion of the Teshuva process and thus Shabbat is an essential ingredient for all those engaged in Teshuva. This can be compared to a sick person who goes to the doctor, and part of the prescription to heal the Aveira (sin) is Shabbat. Shabbat is a pill to heal deficiencies which the Aveira causes in one's soul. Indeed, one needs to know that observing Shabbat is a key part of one's Teshuva; there is no Teshuva without Shabbat.

We discussed on Rosh Hashanah, around the festival table, the idea of dealing with man's soul. It is difficult for each person to make decisions in life; each decision is a struggle to grapple with. And as the days progress, and the number of decisions to make increase, they begin to weigh heavily on a person, and it becomes more difficult to make them. And so we remember in my childhood, there was a gentleman who lived next door to the local Talmud Torah (school), who was constantly entrenched in thought, vacillating as to whether it would be best to do this or that. He was so enveloped in these thoughts, that the situation deteriorated to the extent that each day would spend slightly longer standing at the intersection, deciding whether to turn right or left. Indeed, eventually we would find him standing for hours at the intersection, debating for hours whether it would be better to turn right or left. From that day onwards, people would refer to him as 'either or,' as for him, everything in life was either or. This is a deep problem in man's soul. One can sink into a kind of intelligence that develops day by day, and morphs from intelligence into an actual sickness. Man should instead seek to be light in thought and quick in deciding things - leaving all in G-d's hands.

The approaching Shabbat, is a great and auspicious Shabbat, which encompasses a myriad of awesome Segulot (charms) relating to Teshuva. At the beginning of the creation of the world, we find that Hashem created Adam and warned him not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and yet Adam went ahead and ate from it. Through his disobedience, Adam brought death into the world, as well as the challenges of making a living, the pain of childbirth, and other fundamental curses which stifle our ability to easily expand the world. And then, after the barbaric act of Adam rebelling against his creator, G-d awakened Adam, and Adam did Teshuva, upon which Adam immediately entered into Shabbat. This Shabbat was the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, called 'Shabbat Shuva.' And so after the sin and his subsequent repentance, after hearing the voice of the Shofar of G-d in the Garden of Eden, Adam immediately entered into the Shabbat between Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur; this is the Shabbat of the "return of Israel to Hashem, your G-d (Hoshe 14:2)." The virtue of this Shabbat is to balance, soften and sweeten the sin, and thereby bring one into a new post-sin reality; this is the redemptive power of Shabbat.

Shabbat has the power to recalibrate a sinner, and in this vein, our Sages say: One who serves idolatry, even to the extent of those in the generation of Enosh, yet is particular to observe Shabbat, will be forgiven (on account of his observance of Shabbat) (Shabbat 118b). Shabbat has a very strong power of renewal, such that after his dastardly sin, Adam actually needed Shabbat in order to right himself and find a healthy equilibrium. Similarly we see the redemptive power of Shabbat with Cain. Following Cain committing the first heinous act in the world, namely murdering his brother, he was terrified of the repercussions. Yet Hashem reassured him that: "Anyone who kills Cain, will be resurrected seven times (Bereishit 4:15)." The reference to "seven" assured Cain that Shabbat (the seventh day) would shield and protect him; it would accompany him and serve as a safeguard. Shabbat has a power of safeguarding and rescuing people.

We also find this idea regarding King David, who said: "One thing I asked from Hashem, that thing I will seek, to rest ("shivti") in the house of Hashem all the days of my life (Tehillim 27:4)." David, with all the struggles in his life, understood that it was the resting aspect ("shivti") which comes from the same word as Shabbat, which was the source of his strength and protection. Shabbat was everything for him; he understood that life with Shabbat is a completely different existence. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to understand the depth and profundity of the coming Shabbat, 'Shabbat Shuva.' It is a Shabbat that is different from all other Shabbats, in that it symbolizes the power which Hashem gave us on the holy days of Shabbat. The power that each of them serve as a break-point in the race of life, to differentiate between one week and the next, and sweeten and make order among all the confusion of life. Therefore, the first Shabbat of the year, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is exceptionally transcendent, encompassing a plethora of unique Segulot, such that it is worthwhile to savor every moment of this precious Shabbat.



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Soul Of the Rif

Learning Torah and gaining joy from it, as well as looking at the world from a positive angle is what makes life good for a person. If this is lost, a person does not do well. If you accept upon yourself to do Teshuva, it must be performed at that moment. Not in two minutes' time or a little later, but at that moment, you have already become a different person, the next moment is a new reality. If you decide to be happy, then that moment, you become happy. Work on yourself to change your thoughts and to change, G-d renews the reality of the world on a daily basis, in His goodness. A person can change instantly; the moment a person opts to be positive and happy, they change, there is no delay until an hour later or until the evening. From the moment you know how to maximize every moment, for Teshuva, for Torah, for joy and for positive thoughts, every moment presents another opportunity to gain. One never knows if a given moment will be one's last. The next moment one could, G-d forbid, suffer a heart attack, an accident or an attack; one never knows what is coming. However, if a person thinks in this way, they lose more and more moments in which they could be happy. The same is true about Teshuva, if one does not do Teshuva at this moment, one does not know that they will necessarily have another chance.



2nd Shabbat Meal

Eating on Erev Yom Kippur (the eve of Yom Kippur) repairs the sin of Adam.

If a person wishes to enter Yom Kippur on a great level, they should work on themselves, dealing with the Evil Inclination in the area of the desire to eat. This is the first area of work which a person needs to improve within themselves. In our prayers, we say "Do not remember the first sins (Tehillim 79:8)." In this line, we request of Hashem that He should forget the first sins which we did in our lives, for it is by way of those sins that we descended to all the subsequent sins, for they are the basis.

The first sins which mankind committed are the values and the ground on which all subsequent sins which humanity committed are built upon. The first sin which humanity committed was eating from the Tree of Knowledge after Hashem told Adam not to eat from this tree. The Torah says that he ate from the tree because it was "desirous to the eye (Bereishit 3:6)." On account of desire, Adam ate from the tree and brought about incomparable damage.

Therefore, on Erev Yom Kippur, which is a time of atonement, the time at which a person returns in Teshuva (repentance), they must go and eat in large quantity but do so for the sake of Heaven. When a person does so on Erev Yom Kippur, through this eating, they cause repair for the eating of Adam, which was done only on account of desire; that act of eating brought destruction to the world.

On Erev Yom Kippur, a person must eat for the sake of heaven. A person should declare, "I am eating in order that I will have the strength to fast, I am eating in order to have strength for the service of G-d." A person needs to eat not on account of desire, like a person who sees food in the street and says "Now I will eat this." Rather, a person should eat in order to empower themselves to fast, to learn Torah and to fulfill Mitzvot.

The Talmud tells us about such a person: Whoever eats and drinks on the ninth of Tishrei, the eve of Yom Kippur, is considered as if they fasted on the ninth and the tenth (Brachot 8b). This is because eating on the ninth is a remedy for the sin of Adam, who wrongly ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Repair of the damage of the first sin is achieved through a person eating not out of lust, and this is considered as if one fasted on both the ninth and the tenth.

The power of the influence of sanctity from Yom Kippur spreads to the

rest of one's life. The holy Torah says "And Aharon will offer his bull as a sin offering, and atone for himself and his household ... and he will take from the blood of the bull and sprinkle with his finger towards the cover [of the Ark] towards the east, and before the cover, he will sprinkle seven times with his finger." (Vayikra 16:6, 19). We mention this in our prayers on Yom Kippur, how the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) would sprinkle once upwards and seven times downwards. It is necessary to understand the meaning of this, why is this sprinkling and offering on Yom Kippur different from any procedure performed throughout the year?

There are several explanations which can be made for this. One is that the sprinkling upwards performed on Yom Kippur is because it is an exceptionally sanctified day, and the service of this day is uplifted and exceptionally strong. The more a person is pure and holy on this day, the more it will affect all of their other days. One sprinkling upwards represents how if one's Yom Kippur is uplifted in terms of the level of one's soul and carries great sanctity, then the seven below, i.e., the seven days of the week throughout the year, become sanctified and purified with this power of Yom Kippur. The day of Yom Kippur has great significance to impact on all of the weekdays of the year, if indeed, one's soul is in the fitting elevated state. A further suggestion is that the one sprinkling upwards corresponds to the Good Inclination, while the seven downward sprinklings match the seven names of the Evil Inclination, as listed in the Talmud (Sukkah 52a). If a person sanctifies the Good Inclination to a heavy degree, then the seven below, that is to say the seven names and powers of the Evil Inclination, will be weakened before a person. Therefore, these exceptionally holy days of cleansing and purifying the soul, during which a person can sanctify themselves to be one level higher, and through Yom Kippur and the Good Inclination, a person can improve and strengthen themselves. If one does this, they will dominate over the seven below, all weekdays and the powers of the Evil Inclination. Perhaps a significant concept can be suggested. It is known that the number seven represents nature, and more than seven is above nature. The moment a person is one above and raises themselves with great sanctity, the seven below, that is to say the seven days of the week, are raised to greatly exalted heights, in merit of the one level above which impacts on them, raising them above the natural state of being. For such a person, nothing will come simply through natural means, for they are sanctified and united with Hashem with great holiness.

Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Rabbi, we are a married couple who are becoming more religiously observant, but it is still difficult for us to keep everything. I wanted to ask what to do in certain cases of tension, for example, if the husband wishes to remove the television, but the wife finds this difficult and we do not wish to cause arguments. We want to become better, but there are things which one of us finds easier while the other finds them more difficult.

Answer:

Ensure that you do not argue under any circumstances. In order to become stronger, you need to be united, there is no reality in which two people go on a journey together, and one suddenly starts to travel faster and leaves the other behind. Everything must be done together, you walk together and become stronger as one. One cannot leave the other person behind.

You decided that "We are becoming more religiously observant." There is something disturbing in a case where one person says "yes" to something and the other says "no." If this happens, you must enter compromises, one person relents on one thing, while the other person lets go on something else. The moment you enter a process of becoming better together, if you enter with an understanding that the only obligation you have is to find a solution, then this is good. However, argument and discord must be avoided, nothing can be allowed to be a cause for argument.



3rd Shabbat meal

It is forbidden for a person to allow themselves to enter a state of despair in life.

On Yom Kippur, we read the book of Yonah. Yonah son of Amitai was a prophet and Hashem sent him to Nineveh, which was a gentile city. He was to tell them that Hashem would soon destroy the city because of its wickedness; they had committed many sins and therefore, He wanted to destroy Nineveh. Yonah said that if he were to do this, this would cause an accusation against the Jews, who had not returned in Teshuva, while, in contrast, the gentiles would have listened and returned in Teshuva.

Yonah did not want to do this, in order that the accusation would not be leveled against the Jews. He therefore decided to flee from Hashem and went to the port of Yaffo and ascended into a boat.

The boat departed, when it entered the ocean in earnest, a storm wind suddenly arose and threatened to break and sink the boat. The captain told every person to pray to their god, and they did so. One prayed to the sun, another to the stars and so on. Only Yonah went to the bottom of the ship and lay down. The captain woke him up to pray also. They drew lots to find out who was the cause of the storm, Yonah's name was picked out and he told them to throw him into the ocean, telling them that if they did so, the storm would cease and the boat would be saved.

They did so and Hashem made a miracle, sending a fish to swallow Yonah. He remained inside the fish for a little while, during which time nothing disturbed him. Hashem saw that he was not praying to come out and did not wish to return in Teshuva, so He sent a female fish, and miraculously caused the first fish to spit him out into the mouth of the female fish. The female was pregnant and had many young offspring inside her, causing Yonah discomfort. The Midrash tells of how the fish passed through the Red Sea, and it was then that Yonah began to weep and cry out to Hashem, returning in Teshuva. He then went to Nineveh, delivering his prophecy to them. Hashem then forgave him.

The question must be asked, why do we read this specific Haftara on Yom Kippur rather than any other? What is the depth of the story of Yonah?

Sometimes a person reaches a state of despair, or close to it, and says that nothing matters to them. Such a person is told that they can return to Hashem with Teshuva, and they respond doubtfully, "How can He accept my Teshuva? I have already done so much wrong." Such a person can go to the synagogue with everyone, they all pray but this person is not part of it, they do not live or feel it. They reach a stage that they doubt what can happen even if they were to change, questioning what G-d will do for them after all that they have done, they reason to go on living their lives as they have until that point.

Yonah reached a stage of despair, thinking that whatever would happen would happen anyway. Hashem then brought a stormwind. The same happens when a person reaches the point that they do not care about anything, Hashem brings something sudden, equivalent to a storm at sea and it begins to rage. People can have tranquil lives, which are suddenly shaken by problems, whether these be within families or health or other issues, and the sea rages. If they do not wake up, they are thrown into the proverbial sea. After entering the sea, if they still do not wake up, the fish swallows them. If this does not wake them, they enter another fish, and begin to be surrounded by problems. After this, if they are

still not awakened, Hashem takes them to the Red Sea where Bnei Yisrael did not despair, and Hashem split the sea for them, and then a person will wake up.

It is forbidden for a person to live with an outlook of "Whatever will happen will happen anyway." This entails entering a form of despair, they may not have given up hope, but they say that whatever will happen will take place regardless of what they do. Hashem will punish whoever He will punish; I was not punished last year so the same will happen this year and other forms of confusion which the Evil Inclination plants in a person, these are the most dangerous situations a person can be in. This Haftara is read at Mincha on Yom Kippur, the most powerful time when the Gates of Heaven are open, in order to ensure that a person does not descend to such a place and outlook.



Treasure charms from the Rif



On either the 8th or 9th of the month of Tishrei, one should perform the following charm, by first writing these words on a piece of paper: "Erase, erase, erase all documents outlining our dues; erase, erase, erase all our sins. Silence, silence, silence, all the prosecutors who were created from our sins; all of them should be silenced. Void and nullified, void and nullified: Let all those who snore among us be shamed; let them be like nothing and lost. Let all those who wage battle against us be like nothing; they should be forsaken, such that they perish with no remnants. They should be overcome by fear and trepidation, from contemplating the might of Your strength, such that they should be silenced like stone." After you have personally written these words by hand on a piece of paper, you should go to a sea, or large river, and read all of these words in a hushed tone. Upon concluding reading these words, you should tie the piece of paper to a stone and throw the paper and stone in a deep part of the sea or river. Immediately after disposing of it, you should say:



“So should all the prosecutors and antagonists be thrown and silenced into the rapids of the water. They should fall and not rise. They should be overcome with trepidation and fear from contemplating the might of Your strength, such that they should be silenced like stone. They knelt down and fell, whilst we stood up, fully supported. Hashem, our savior, will answer us on the day that we read this. Let the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of my heart, be favorable before You, Hashem, my rock and redeemer.”

Rabbi Akiva

Be thankful and rejoice for that which you have, as there are those who have less than you.

Rabbi Akiva was one of the greatest Jews from throughout the generations, however as the Talmud (Nedarim 50a) relates, he came from humble beginnings. Below is his story:

Initially Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd, a simple man. Aged forty, he was spotted by the daughter of an affluent gentleman named Kalba Savua. The lady, who was Kalba Savua's only daughter, discerned a unique refinement in Rabbi Akiva. She recognized that at the time he was distant from Hashem, not even knowing the Hebrew alphabet, however despite this she was drawn to him and made the following request. She asked him to marry her on condition that he promise that he would go and learn Torah. Rabbi Akiva responded that he was willing to accept this upon himself. At this point, the young lady approached her father and informed him that she wanted to marry the shepherd, Rabbi Akiva. Upon hearing that his beloved only daughter was committed to marrying this simpleton, Kalba Savua disowned her, banishing her from the house, and refused to provide for her wellbeing. However, the young lady, brimming with conviction and fortitude, went ahead and married the shepherd.

Initially the young couple had nowhere to live, and so they found themselves living amongst the animals in animal sheds. She, the daughter of a fabulously wealthy man, raised her children among the straw and animal fodder, strong in her conviction that she was living the way she was meant to. One day, Eliyahu HaNavi (Elijah the prophet) appeared at their door in the guise of a beggar. He knocked on the door and introduced himself as a man who had fallen on hard times. He explained that he had a wife and children and had nothing to give them, he didn't even have any straw for them to rest their heads on to sleep. Upon hearing this, Rabbi Akiva and his wife immediately gave some of their straw to him. Once he had left, Rabbi Akiva turned to his wife and said: "Look, see that we have straw to use as pillows for our heads, whilst some don't even have that, let us thank Hashem for the straw which He has given us." There is a question on this episode which we have struggled with for years. Eliyahu HaNavi came to Rabbi Akiva to strengthen him, appearing to him from heaven, dressed up as a beggar requesting straw. Why could Eliyahu not have given Rabbi Akiva, who was so desperately poor, some money or food? Seeing as a great miracle had already occurred, in Eliyahu being revealed, why could he not at least have brought a little bit of food with him?

The answer is as follows: Had Eliyahu given Rabbi Akiva some money or food, he would not have been able to achieve the purpose of his visit. The sole reason why Eliyahu had come was to give Rabbi Akiva the appreciation that there are others who are poorer than he was, and struggling more than him. Hashem understood that miracles, such as gifting one money or food, are not always needed to strengthen someone and encourage them to follow the good path. Rather, sometimes it is worth coming simply to impart a single message to people, such as a lesson to be grateful for what they have, seeing as others have less. Eliyahu came solely to teach Rabbi Akiva this message, and therefore did not need to bring anything else with

him. Man ought to fill himself with a great faith, which will accompany him through any troubling time.

A Jew needs to exert himself with all his strength to always believe in Hashem with Emuna Shleimah (perfect faith). He should seek to always have this Emuna, rather than simply seeking to build Emuna in Hashem only during a trying time, telling himself that he believes in Hashem - this form of Emuna is merely conditional Emuna. If one instead constantly builds his Emuna, then it will be robust and strong, and allow him to deal with challenging circumstances when they arise. However, if one fails to constantly build his Emuna, then when a challenge befalls him, his Emuna will be weak. Only if one constantly invigorates his Emuna - to the extent that he truly internalizes the idea of Mesirat Nefesh (self-sacrifice), such that he sees everything as being from Hashem, will he be able to deal with a challenge which presents itself. In this vein, our holy Rabbis comment on the verse: "I have kept my faith, for I speak (Psalms 116:10)." They say that one reaches a strong Emuna in Hashem "for I speak" - through 'speaking' about building Emuna all the time to reinforce their Emuna. This constant exertion to build one's Emuna triggers Hashem to help and give one the strength to solidify their Emuna. We find this very idea expressed in the Talmud (Berachot 61b) regarding Rabbi Akiva. The Talmud relates that Rabbi Akiva was escorted out to his death during the time of the recital of Shema. They were scraping his skin off with boiling iron combs, all the while Rabbi Akiva was focused on accepting Hashem's sovereignty with love (while reciting Shema). His disciples turned to him aghast, and asked how he could possibly recite the Shema prayer while suffering. Rabbi Akiva responded that all his life he had been distressed for not having been afforded the opportunity to truly fulfill the directive to love Hashem "with all your soul", meaning, even if G-d takes your soul. He turned to his disciples and said, "now that it has been afforded to me, shall I not fulfill it?"

Rabbi Akiva, a man of 120 years, who was tortured in the most gruesome way on Yom Kippur, turned to his students in his final moments and informed them that this was the moment he had been waiting for his entire life. The holy Sefarim (books) write that Rabbi Akiva's disciples were distraught to see their dear teacher, who at forty years old had embraced Torah, and had subsequently achieved all there was to achieve in this world, be tortured in the cruelest manner. The disciples observed that the torture wasn't paining him and asked how this could possibly be so, to which he responded that he had been waiting for this moment all his life. Rabbi Akiva, throughout his entire life, had cultivated his Emuna, to the extent that even when he reached the stage whereby his skin was being removed in what ought to have been the most excruciating manner, his Emuna remained strong, and it did not hurt him. The huge reservoir of Emuna which Rabbi Akiva had been nurturing every day stood with him during this most trying moment, and enveloped him, such that he did not even feel the pain.

Rabbi Akiva's disciples witnessed him undergo the most painful death, but do so with perfect peace of mind, reciting the Shema, totally unaware of what was transpiring around him. They asked how he was able to do this, to which he responded that all his life he had contemplated and built his Emuna; this he explained, had strengthened him and allowed him to weather this test without feeling any pain. One needs to know that life is such that sudden trials and tragedies can befall a person at any moment. We have seen people who lived in tranquil bliss, until one day the gates of Gehinnom (Hell) opened up before them. If one lives with constant Emuna, then the reservoirs of Emuna which they cultivate will always support them, and they will epitomize the verse: "Though I walk in the valley overshadowed by death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me (Tehillim 23:4)," this is to say that if Hashem is with someone, that person will be able to surmount any challenge with joy.

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